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ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Activities of the United Nations Environment Programme in environmental monitoring

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly, pursuant to its resolution 48/192 of 21 December 1993, the report of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

* A/50/150.

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ANNEX

Earthwatch, environment monitoring and assessment

Report of the Governing Council

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report has been prepared in response to the request contained in General Assembly resolution 48/192 of 21 December 1993 for "a report on the activities of the Programme in environmental monitoring, containing proposals and recommendations within the context of Agenda 21 and a review of Earthwatch". a/ The General Assembly in that resolution also invited the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to consider the report at its eighteenth session and submit its conclusions and recommendations to the General Assembly at its fiftieth session, through the Economic and Social Council.

2. In its decision 18/27 A, adopted on 25 May 1995, the Governing Council authorized the Executive Director of UNEP to transmit the present report to the General Assembly at its fiftieth session, through the Economic and Social Council.

II. THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM-WIDE EARTHWATCH

3. In response to General Assembly resolutions 44/224 of 22 December 1989 and 48/192, to UNEP Governing Council decision 16/37 and to Agenda 21 (Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992) (paras. 38.22 (d), 40.8 and 40.13), the United Nations system-wide Earthwatch is being revitalized as a closely linked collaborative set of international efforts to coordinate, harmonize and integrate observing, assessment and reporting activities. This requires timely information on the status and trends of key global resources, the pressures on them, the variables and processes in both natural and human systems and the range of possible responses to problems in these areas. It also requires a more rapid flow of information through the system and the more direct targeting of decision-making processes, so that policy makers can receive more timely and appropriate information.

4. The United Nations system-wide Earthwatch cannot be content to assess each problem in isolation, but must examine them in combination and draw out the key policy issues to be addressed by the international community. In this regard, the Administrative Committee on Coordination report to the Governing Council (UNEP/GC.18/37) recommended that UNEP and the system-wide Earthwatch should continue to develop approaches to the linking of socio-economic and environmental assessment and reporting, and requested the Earthwatch Working Party to give further attention to the conceptual issues involved. Each participating agency should, within the limitations of available resources, strengthen its contributions to information for decision-making and improve its linkages with cooperating partners. UNEP, in its coordinating role for the

environment, should focus on how all of the parts fit together into an integrated whole.

5. The Earthwatch Working Party of all the concerned United Nations organizations was set up to facilitate the taking of decisions in common, in order to develop concrete plans and increase efficiency and effectiveness by reducing redundancy. UNEP has established a small Earthwatch secretariat to maintain continuous liaison between the partners and to assist in implementing common activities. It is envisaged that many functions of Earthwatch can be carried out by ad hoc groups of experts drawn from all of the agencies. Some of the first initiatives being developed are described in the report to the third session of the Commission on Sustainable Development b/ of the Secretary-General on chapter 40: Information for decision-making and Earthwatch, developed jointly by UNEP and the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, which contains annexes elaborating on the principal agency and inter-agency elements supporting Earthwatch and which highlights the need for all States to support the Earthwatch process, including through the provision of expertise and data.

6. On the basis of an in-depth study of Earthwatch c/ and the increased collaboration now established, as well as the results of the review of chapter 40 of Agenda 21 by the Commission on Sustainable Development and the review of Earthwatch [by the UNEP Governing Council, the critical needs to implement] Earthwatch across the United Nations system in close cooperation with Governments are being defined (reports of the Earthwatch Working Party, 1-2 June 1994 and 22-23 March 1995). A major task will be to conceive an internationally accepted policy and coordination framework for Earthwatch. The requirements will be assembled into a coherent package of specific, well-targeted activities, together with proposals for long-term funding strategies for interested Governments and other donors as a further step towards the effective implementation of this important dimension of Agenda 21.

III. ENVIRONMENT MONITORING

7. Building on the experience of the Global Environment Monitoring System (GEMS) and other efforts, major international scientific planning and inter-agency cooperative efforts are under way to advance a set of complementary global observing systems - the Global Climate Observing System, the Global Ocean Observing System, and the Global Terrestrial Observing System - covering the major environmental compartments. These systems intend to go beyond inherently time-limited research programmes towards the operational data collection and assessment necessary to identify and respond to the long-term and widespread changes which may affect the human condition. UNEP is a co-sponsor of all these systems and, logically, their close interrelation and complementarity should be ensured as part of Earthwatch. A realistic and long-term funding strategy must be developed.

8. UNEP sees a particular role for itself in trying to minimize, to the extent possible, the data disparities between countries. In this regard, Earthwatch is exploring the potential to use schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media and other groups in building a more complete picture of the status of

species, land uses, development activities, pollution problems and other characteristics of the human and natural environment as inputs for state-of-the-environment reporting and as a basis for selective continued monitoring of national and global trends and for filling data gaps.

IV. ENVIRONMENT ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

9. In response to the mandates in Agenda 21 and to the growing demands for environmental information that take development aspects into consideration, UNEP has reviewed its monitoring, assessment and reporting functions. The refocused environment assessment programme of UNEP, to be coordinated by the Division of Environment Assessment, includes the assessment and reporting functions of GEMS, incorporating the former State of the Environment Unit, the data management functions of the Global Resource Information Database (GRID), the capacity-building and regional networking of the environment and natural resources information networks, and United Nations system-wide Earthwatch coordination.

10. The programme has been reshaped to attend more explicitly to the needs of policy makers and to the data and information-handling capabilities of countries. It is geared towards making the best use of UNEP's own areas of comparative advantage: global and regional assessment and reporting; data and information management, harmonization and dissemination; regional environment and natural resources information network servicing. The proposed programme structure addresses the needs for policy-relevant information products supported by a scientifically valid, user-friendly information base developed through regional networks of capable information providers, integrators and users. This approach has received broad acceptance in several areas: by Governments in regional users' consultations; by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in defining joint activities, especially in the Asia and Pacific region; by the science community and NGO partners; and by the agencies involved in the Earthwatch Working Party.

11. The programme has developed a strategic plan to weave sectoral and regional assessments and the biennial Global Environment Outlook series into a process which will culminate in the 2002 decadal state-of-the-environment report. The framework on which the process will be based is currently being developed through international consultations. It provides for linking socio-economic driving forces with observed impacts on the environment and human welfare. United Nations system-wide efforts to develop indicators for sustainable development (see para. 14) are also based on this framework.

12. The assessment process will give priority attention to analysis of the interactions between environment and development, identification of current and potential emerging issues of international importance and possible effective strategies in response to the major pressures exerted on the environment and on human welfare. UNEP assessments and reports are being produced through participatory processes, drawing on the best available expertise and knowledge existing at national, regional and global institutes, steered by a growing global network of collaborating institutes and relevant United Nations agencies. They rely on regional policy consultations throughout the production process to

reflect priority issues and concerns and ensure that the assessment findings have operational relevance. Associated benefits are a better scientific understanding of the relationships between environment and the socio-economic fabric of life and better tools to analyse and quantify these relationships as well as their projected impacts in the future.

13. In full cooperation with United Nations partners, particularly DPCSD and the United Nations Statistical Division, and with scientific groups, such as the Scientific Council on Problems of the Environment, the environment assessment programme is contributing to the internationally harmonized development of sustainable development indicators for measuring progress in their particular sectors on priority issues, and to provide countries with a range of choice of indicators suitable to specific environmental, social and economic settings. In addition, UNEP is planning an indicators network to facilitate information flow among those working in the field. The organizations cooperating in the United Nations system-wide Earthwatch (see paras. 3-6) should be able to help the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development to support national efforts to use indicators for policy-making and as guides to sustainability, as well as in reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development.

14. UNEP's environment assessment programme is building on the success of activities such as GRID for information management, data harmonization and dissemination. Thus, the data and information management component of the Division of Environment Assessment is operating a computerized catalogue ("meta-database") on environmental data and information, developing critical datasets for assessments and assisting and supporting national Governments, regional data networks and other programmes in their efforts to improve access to and management of relevant and meaningful data and information on the environment.

15. The regionally focused institutional capacity-enhancement and servicing component of the programme aims to build a sustainable information base for both national and international assessment and reporting. The Environment and Natural Resource Information Networks provide an enabling environment for acquiring, handling, sharing and analysing environmental data and generating policy-relevant information. Predicated on partnerships with donors and other United Nations agencies, particularly UNDP, this programme component is linking regional and national institutions in a cooperative network to address issues of particular regional significance.

16. A realistic funding strategy for UNEP's environment assessment programme needs to include the following elements: ensuring adequate and sufficient core funding within UNEP to maintain a basic assessment functionality and to provide the forum for regional or global cooperation; ensuring partnership with national agencies through the decentralized national networks of UNEP's environment assessment programme; developing close working partnerships with multilateral and bilateral donors active in the field of environment and sustainable development to coordinate and implement priority activities and programmes; identifying agency national focal points to guide in harnessing existing national capacities, with capacity-building assistance as necessary, to ensure

that programmes address national needs as well as issues of international significance within cooperating international environment assessment networks.

Notes

a/ The term "Earthwatch" has been used since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held at Stockholm in 1972, often ambiguously, to refer both to UNEP's programme in the area of environment assessment and to the United Nations system-wide environment assessment activities. Although attempts have been made in the past few years to confine its use to the United Nations system-wide context, as in "United Nations system-wide Earthwatch", conventional usage persists in applying "Earthwatch" to UNEP's environment assessment activities, to the relevant system-wide activities, or to both. In the present report, the term "Earthwatch" is confined to the United Nations system-wide context.

b/ E/CN.17/1995/18 and Add.1.

c/ "The United Nations system-wide Earthwatch programme", 10 March 1995.